

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Metropolitan Museum of Art

and/or common Metropolitan Museum of Art

2. Location

street & number Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street

not for publication

city, town New York City

vicinity of

state New York

code

county New York

code

code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name City of New York

street & number City Hall

city, town New York City

vicinity of

state

New York

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. New York County Hall of Records

street & number 31 Chambers Street

city, town New York City

state

New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records National Park Service

city, town Washington

state

DC

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

America's first three major art museums were all incorporated in the same year, 1870. One was the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the second was in Washington, DC, now called the Corcoran Gallery, and the third was the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Construction of the Metropolitan has spanned more than a century. The actual building was designed and begun with the plans of Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould, Architects in 1874 and was completed by 1880. This original structure was in the popular Ruskinian Gothic style. The succeeding building changed almost over night to the Roman Temple popularized by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Additions followed: 1895-1902; Richard Morris Hunt did the Fifth Avenue facade and between 1904 and 1926 McKim, Mead, and White added the north and south wings to Hunt's central block. The latest additions have been designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates.

A brief architectural description is extracted from the New York City Landmarks Commission's nomination report:

The first of the fifteen units comprising the colossal building, was begun in 1874 and the expansion program is still continuing. Although these component parts were designed by eminent architects and reflect diverse architectural styles, they are well related in scale to each other. Some consider the dramatic central element of the long limestone facade facing Fifth Avenue to be the most significant architecturally. Completed in 1902, it represents Richard Morris Hunt's masterpiece in the Roman style.

This imposing entrance with its wide, central flight of stairs is comprised of three monumental arches set between four pairs of free standing Corinthian columns on high pedestals each with its own entablature. They support massive blocks of stone which were intended to become sculptural groups set in front of a high attic story. Crowning this attic story is an ornately decorated cornice with female heads connected by swags. The richness of this design of Hunt's is in marked contrast to the initial Victorian Gothic unit designed by Calvert Vaux in 1880. Two subsequent additions to the north and south were built in 1888 and 1894. Facing the park and set well back from the Avenue, these buildings are of red brick with stone base, trim, and cornice and high pitched slate roofs. Hunt's creation blocked out the view of this original group, and his design succeeded in determining the future architectural character of the entire Fifth Avenue facade. Two contiguous units to the north completed in 1911 and 1913 and two to the south completed in 1916 and 1926 were designed by McKim, Mead, and White. These extremely handsome additions, though simpler, are in complete harmony with Hunt's classic central portion.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1880 **Builder/Architect** Vaux & Mould, Richard M. Hunt

McKim, Mead, and White; Roche & Dinkeloo

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

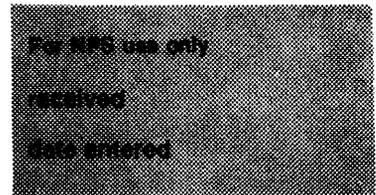
One of the most monumental of all of New York's public buildings is the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Extending over four city blocks on the east side of Central Park, the museum is one of the most prestigious in the world both for its imposing building and for the quality of its collections. In the last quarter of the 19th century there was a great burst of artistic activity in America. A number of institutions were founded -- art societies, the American School of Classical Studies in Rome, etc., all to be housed in neo-Greek and Roman Temples. There was an American Renaissance, best represented architecturally by Beaux Arts Classicism. Museums proliferated across the country, all with their columned facades, representing culture and symbolizing education and taste. The architectural image of the museum changed from the red-brick and terra cotta Gothic Revival edifice to Roman pomp and theatre. The Fifth Avenue facade of the Metropolitan Museum is an outstanding example of this period and is the work of the first major American architect trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Richard Morris Hunt. It was his last major commission and one he wanted to be his monument, an embodiment of his artistic ideals that would mold public taste. It succeeded admirably.

A brief history of the building indicates that rapid expansion and acquisition of collections dictated adding needed exhibition and storage space. The original building which faced Central Park, was begun in 1874, finished in 1880, and was designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould. It was Victorian Gothic in style. This first structure was not a great success. In 1888 a south wing, also facing the park, was designed by Theodore Weston in the neo-American Classic style and in 1894, a similar north wing was built to the designs of Arthur L. T. Tuckerman. Both men were closely connected to the Metropolitan. Tuckerman was resident architect at the museum and Weston was a trustee. This expansion not only provided more space but changed the main door from the west to the south side. The museum was always meant to be integrated with Central Park, partly to facilitate expansion when needed and partly for safety reasons to avoid the threat of fire from adjoining structures. Frederick Law Olmsted, who had designed the park, was both a Park Commissioner and a museum trustee. He said that the Park would refresh "the lagging spirit and the pallid complexion" through contact with both the beauty of nature and the museum to "uplift" the eye through the contemplation of beauty made by man.

In 1885, the trustees hired America's most prestigious architect, Richard Morris Hunt, to develop a master plan that fundamentally changed both the museum's style of architecture and its access from the park. It also became the prototype for dozens of museums across the country. Following his great success at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, Hunt laid out a plan for the Metropolitan that can only be called imperial:

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Another unit, unusually significant architecturally but seen only from the Park and from a courtyard at the northwest corner of the Museum complex, is the facade of the Old Assay Office Building which was located on Wall Street from 1824 to 1912. Saved from destruction by I. N. Phelps Stokes, this facade was dismantled in 1915 and stored on the Museum grounds until it was re-erected in 1924 at its present location as a part of the American Wing. Of marble and in the Federal style, it was designed by Martin E. Thompson and is one of the most beautiful examples of the refined architecture characteristic of that period.

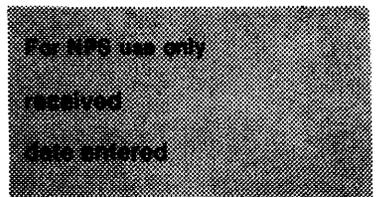
One enters the museum at the main floor after ascending the steps leading from Fifth Avenue and passing through the central one of three great arches. The entrance vestibule is given particular distinction by the curved walls at the north and south end with large blind openings set in the curves of the walls. Each opening has an eared enframingent surmounted by a cornice set on console brackets. A large tablet commemorating J. P. Morgan, third president of the museum, is placed at the north end. The ceiling is adorned by a dentiled cornice.

From the entrance vestibule one passes through a colonnade into the Great Hall, a vast and imposing interior space. The use of warm-toned Indiana limestone and the carefully-designed ornamental detail give the room distinction and character. The Great Hall rises two stories beneath three saucer domes with circular skylights. A gallery in the form of a balcony at the second floor enhances the sense of spaciousness as do the colonnades at each side of the room at the main floor. Each colonnade is composed of four fluted columns with Ionic capitals. The columns support an entablature which continues around the room at the level of the gallery. Ornamental panels with acorns and sunflowers adorn the frieze of the entablature and a dentiled cornice surmounts it. This in turn supports a limestone balcony railing with pierced stone panels which encircles the room at the second floor. Among the distinctive features at the main floor are four ornamental niches set in the bases of the piers in the east and west walls, originally designed for statues. Each arched niche has a keystone incorporating scallop and conch shell motifs. The arch is flanked by large brackets adorned with swags and resting on acorns. The brackets support a pediment containing a cartouche set above ornamental fruit motifs.

The Great Hall is subdivided into three bays by piers carrying arches which support the three saucer domes. The arches, which rise above dentiled cornices acting as pier capitals, are outlined by bead-and-reel and leaf-and-tongue moldings. The pendentives of each dome are paneled, while leaf-and-tongue moldings and a series of closely spaced brackets with egg-and-dart moldings above and between them encircle the base of each dome. The original brackets were larger, more elaborate, and linked by swags, but during alteration work in the 1930s the brackets were changed to their present form. The skylights in the domes are encircled by wreath moldings and Greek fret motifs.

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The transverse passageway which connects the Great Hall with the Grand Staircase behind the western colonnade has limestone walls and a dentiled ceiling cornice. Very deep round arches with panels in the reveals are set in the side walls. Two openings lead to the corridors which flank the Grand Staircase at the north and south. The enframements of these openings have deep paneled reveals, and they are surmounted by cornices carried on console brackets.

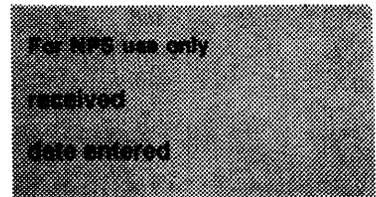
In the north and south corridors there is one arch in each which opens onto the hallway of the Grand Staircase, and a series of arches, most of which are now blind, lines the walls. Both corridors are adorned by dentiled ceiling cornices.

The Grand Staircase, contained within a long narrow hallway, rises in a broad sweep from the main floor to the second floor with a landing at mid-point. The walls lining the stairs are rusticated. At main floor level they are punctuated by two arched openings leading to the north and south corridors which paralleled the stair hallway. The rustication keyed to the arches enhances these openings. At the second floor an arcade opens out above the staircase onto side galleries with five arches on each side. Each arch enframement is adorned with flower motifs as are the bracketed keystones. The outer arches are flanked by paired engaged columns and have handsome spandrel panels with carved figures of angels blowing trumpets. This sculpture was executed by Karl Bitter, the artist who so often collaborated with Hunt. The spandrels of the inner arches have wreaths and laurel branches. These arches are flanked by engaged fluted columns with stylized Corinthian capitals which support a continuous entablature with modillioned cornice, above which rises a barrel-vaulted ceiling. A large arch at the east end of the stair hallway has an enframement which extends down to the level of the second floor. Its keystone consists of a carved female head. At the landing and in the transverse corridor at the top of the stairs a series of arches rising from piers defines the spaces and provides access to the side galleries which open on the stairs. Above the landing the coved ceiling has a central panel once containing a skylight, which is outlined by a laurel wreath. The two side galleries at the north and south, and set behind the open arcade, lead back to the balconied main gallery which encircles the Great Hall at the second floor level.

Access to these side galleries from the main gallery is through two openings flanking the large arch at the east end of the stair hallway. The enframement of each arch is surmounted by an arched pediment set on a rectangular panel flanked by brackets with floral motifs.

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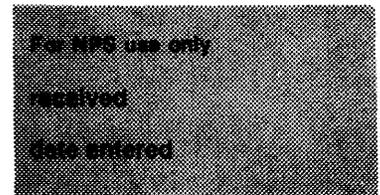
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The ceiling above the main gallery at the second floor is vaulted with arches rising from the same piers which carry the saucer domes above the Great Hall. Large blind arches adorn the walls. The limestone arch enframements are outlined with egg-and-dart and leaf-and-tongue moldings. On the east wall large tripartite window openings with rectilinear grill-work are set in the arches. Handsome bands of marble define the patterns of the floors at both the main floor and the second floor.

A detailed description of the many galleries can be obtained from the Museum's architect in residence.

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Its wings extended more than 1500 feet along Fifth Avenue from 79th to 85th Streets (in clear violation of the 1878 lease). Other wings, joined by colonnades and pavilions of varying styles from Roman through Gothic and Renaissance, stretched to the very edge of the East Drive in the Park. The style of the structure was to be colossal Neoclassic, similar to Hunt's highly acclaimed Administration Building at the World's Columbian Exposition. It was a splendid plan, but somewhat impractical: the nagging problem of how the new palace -- 18 acres of pure white marble -- was to be paid for, maintained, serviced, cleaned, guarded, and filled with art objects was never specified.

True enough, Hunt's master plan returned to the scheme of large open courts which had played such an important role in the original plan of Calvert Vaux, but in the process all else was destined for eventual destruction, for it is clear that Hunt detested not only the Vaux Gothic but the Weston-Tuckerman 16th-century-Italian Revival as well. His master plan obliterated the original building and its northern and southern extensions.

The Great Hall, the only part of the Hunt plan ever completed, deliberately masks the red brick structure behind it. In one stroke Hunt created an extravaganza of Neoclassic architecture and one of the most beautiful grand interiors in the city -- "a stately bride arrayed in spotless white stands the beautiful new hall" -- as one newspaper reporter put it. But in the same stroke the Metropolitan became firmly street- or avenue-oriented. From then on the Park aspect and the entrance were abandoned.

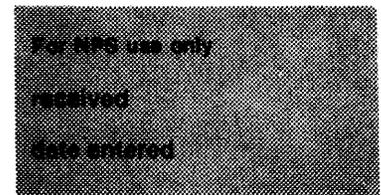
Hunt's distaste for the earlier building led him to erect a long, connected structure with narrow and confusing side galleries and a staircase leading to the upper gallery. Nevertheless, the overall addition is not too unlike a "threshold to some great palace," as one critic at the time described it.

What is remarkable about all this is that the Great Hall was built despite the fact that Richard Morris Hunt died in 1895, leaving vague soft-pencil sketches of only the exterior of the Great Hall. He never drew a line to indicate his treatment of the interior of the Hall or his design of the interior stairs. Both were done from scratch by the architect's son, Richard Howland Hunt, with the considerable aid of the architect George C. Post, whom the Museum Trustees had prudently assigned to the task of supervision.

Barely two years after the opening in 1902 of the Great Hall, the Building Committee quietly dropped Hunt's son and instructed the eminent architectural firm of McKim, Mead, & White to prepare another all-inclusive design to complete the building. The new plan was similar in many respects to Hunt's, in that it proposed a symmetrical rectangular mass with a formal entrance from the Park, a grandiose Fifth Avenue facade, and a series of large open courts within the Museum. But it was far more modest in size and use of material than Hunt had specified.

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For a while, the Trustees adhered to the McKim, Mead, & White master plan more scrupulously than any other. In successive openings, the galleries containing the J. P. Morgan collection of Decorative Arts, the great Egyptian collection, and the Greek and Roman works were completed in 1910, 1911, 1913, 1916, and 1926. All but the Morgan Wing was constructed on Fifth Avenue in a Roman-Italian Renaissance style to blend in with the Hunt exterior of the Great Hall. The only change contemplated in Hunt's exterior was a widening of the front steps to conform to the proportions of the new 900-foot facade of the Fifth Avenue structure. The new additions were considered by the critics to be among the most successful that the Museum had ever accomplished. The press was particularly effusive about the garden court for Roman sculpture, now the Fountain Restaurant: "We are in a museum," the reporter said, "but there is nothing 'museological' about it. Living nature enters the scheme and the effect is one of pure charm."

But during the extensive construction of the buildings designed by McKim, Mead & White, the Trustees once again ignored the master plan by allowing Robert deForest to hire Grosvenor Atterbury to design his American Wing in 1924. The Wing -- with its open court into which a visitor may look but never enter -- is architecturally a difficult appendage, so awkwardly placed that it immediately shattered any hope of fulfilling the symmetrical effect of the McKim, Mead, & White plan. The American Wing has always presented headaches to those who want to organize the Museum into a unified entity. These problems were exacerbated by the addition in 1931 of an even more haphazard appendage to the American Wing, the Van Rensselaer Period Room.

The next master plan in the Museum's history was undertaken by its fifth director, Francis Henry Taylor. In the years 1940 to 1943 Taylor's architect was Robert B. O'Connor, who worked in association with the Parks Department consultative architect, Aymar Embury II. For the first time, monumental architecture for its own sake was not the highest priority. The architects addressed themselves to the solution of pressing modern problems: how to put the vast collections in logical order; how to create architecture for the display of art; and how to provide storage, office space, seminar rooms, and libraries. It was Taylor who enunciated the general principle of reorganizing the cluttered and archaic Metropolitan into a series of "museums" of different civilizations and culture. He sought to ease the confusion of the layman faced with this vast library of the art of 5,000 years.¹

In 1970, the first phase of the Museum's final master plan was initiated with the opening of the restored and reconstructed Fifth Avenue Entrance and Plaza and The Great Hall. The architectural firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates was retained to prepare a master plan for design of new wings as well as the reconstruction of certain existing areas. The early stages of this master plan were overseen by the Museum's seventh Director, Thomas P. F. Hoving. During his administration, in addition to the restorations previously mentioned, the Robert Lehman Wing was opened to the public in 1975. Since 1978, when Philippe de Montebello

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became Director, The Sackler Wing containing the Temple of Dendur opened in 1978; the new American Wing opened in 1980; and The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing opened in 1982. The two wings which remain under construction are the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing which is scheduled to open in 1987 and the European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Wing which has a projected opening date of 1988.

The exterior and interior spaces, built over a number of years, lend a grand and opulent setting for the famous collections housed within them. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is the finest museum in the country and among the greatest in the world.

In 1905, Henry James described it as "a palace of art, truly, that sits there on the edge of the Park, rearing with a radiance, yet offering you expanses to tread."

¹ The Second Century the Comprehensive Plan for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970. pp. 10-15.

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